THE PRIVATE LETTERS

EDITORS' NOTE

One of the most characteristic literary forms during the European Renaissance was the private letter, a vogue begun in the fourteenth century by the indefatigable father of humanism, Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca), and continued by his humanist successors for the next two centuries. Within the context of Italian Renaissance literature, the collections of letters by Petrarch, Michelangelo, Pietro Aretino, and Machiavelli—to mention only the most important and best known—not only constitute a rich source of valuable information about the lives and times of these men, but also contain some of the period's best prose. While other literary genres had more confining boundaries, the private letter allowed a Renaissance writer the freedom to express his personal feelings to a friend in a relaxed tone, much as he might have done in an informal conversation. But while these familiar letters were usually addressed to close friends, they were almost always intended for a wider audience and, eventually, for posterity.

Machiavelli's correspondence is notable for its striking mixture of styles and for the engaging self-portrait it contains of a man whose warmth and good humor belie the evil legends that have sprung up around his name. In a letter dated January 31, 1515, and addressed to Francesco Vettori, Machiavelli himself notes that his tone may surprise some readers in the future:

Anyone who might see our letters, my dear friend, and might note their diversity would be very amazed, for at one point he would think that we were very serious men, involved in weighty matters, and that we never entertained a thought which was not lofty and honest. But then, turning the page, he would discover that these same serious men were frivolous, inconstant, lustful, and occupied with trifles. This manner of ours, although to some it may be disgraceful, seems worthy of praise to me, because we imitate Nature, which herself is various, and anyone who imitates Nature cannot be criticized.

The following selection presents only seven of the nearly two hundred and fifty private letters which have been preserved from Machiavelli's hand And this large

number does not include the even more numerous edited and still unedited letters and chancery documents which he wrote or had written in his capacity as an employee of the Florentine republic. The first and earliest letter is addressed to the Florentine envoy at the papal court in Rome, Ricciardo Becchi. It describes Machiavelli's reaction to one of Savonarola's sermons and should be read together with Machiavelli's remarks in The Prince about "unarmed prophets" (VI) and the views he expresses on religion in The Discourses. *As far as contemporary scholars can determine, Machiavelli probably received his post in the government because of his lack of sympathy for the friar's views, or "lies," as he terms them here.*

I

TO RICCIARDO BECCHI

In order to give you, as you requested, a complete report of things here concerning the friar, I would have you know that after delivering the two sermons, of which you have already received a copy, he preached on the Sunday of the carnival, and after saying many things, he invited all his devotees to share communion with him on carnival day at San Marco. And he said that he wanted to pray to God that He give some clear sign if the things that he had predicted did not come from Him; and he did this, as some say, in order to unify his following and to make it stronger in his defense, fearing that the newly elected (but not announced) Signoria might be opposed to him. When the Signoria was announced on Monday, an event of which you must be already fully aware, he judged it more than two thirds hostile to him, and since the Pope had sent a directive which summoned him, under pain of interdiction, and since he was worried that the Signoria might want him to obey immediately, he decided, whether by his own choice or whether so advised by others, to renounce the preaching in Santa Reparata and to go to San Marco. And so, on Thursday morning, when the Signoria assumed its authority, he announced in Santa Reparata that in order to avoid any scandal and to serve the honor of God, he wished to withdraw from his position and that the men should come to listen to him in San Marco while the women should go to San Lorenzo to hear Brother Domenico. When our friar found himself in his own home, you can well imagine with what audacity he began his sermons and with what audacity he continued them; since he was afraid for himself, he believed that the new Signoria

would not hesitate to harm him, and since he had decided that a good many citizens would accompany him in his downfall, he began his talk by frightening everybody; he used arguments that were very convincing to those who did not examine them carefully, showing how his followers were the most excellent of men and his enemies the most wicked, using every rhetorical device that existed to weaken his opponents and to strengthen his own faction. Since I was present, let me tell you briefly about a few of these devices.

The source of his first sermon in San Marco was this passage from Exodus: "But the more they tortured them, the more they multiplied and grew" [1: 12]; and before he came to the explanation of these words, he showed why he had withdrawn and said: "Prudence is right thinking in practical affairs."[1] Then he said that all men have had and still do have a purpose, but that they are different ones: "For Christians, their goal is Christ; for other men, either present or past, it has been and still is something different, according to their religion. Since we who are Christians are directed to that end which is Christ, we should, with the utmost prudence and following the customs of the times, preserve His honor, and when it is time for a man to hide himself, he should hide, as we read of Christ and of Saint Paul"; and thus, he added, "It is our duty to do this and we have done it, for when it was time to resist danger, we did it, as was the case on Ascension Day, for to do so was demanded by the honor of God and the times. Now the honor of God requires that we yield to anger, and we have yielded." And having given this brief speech, he described two groups of people—one that fought for God, this was himself and his devotees, and the other commanded by the Devil, which was his opponents. And having discussed this in great detail, he entered into an exposition of the words he had cited from Exodus, and he said that through tribulations good men increased in two ways, in spirit and in number; in spirit, since men join themselves more closely with God when adversity confronts them and they become stronger, as their source is nearer, just as hot water set near a fire becomes hotter, since it is nearer its source. Men grow also in number. There are three types of men: the good man, and these are those who follow him; the perverse and obstinate, and these are his enemies; and another kind of man who is careless, devoted to pleasures, neither obstinate in evildoing nor dedicated to good deeds, since he cannot discern the one from the other; but when between the good and the bad there arises some factual difference (since opposites placed together are more clearly contrasted), he recognizes the evil of the wicked and the simplicity of the good, and he flees from the former and draws nearer to the latter, since all men avoid evil and willingly, by nature, they seek out the good; and so it is this way that in times of adversity the

good increase and the evil become fewer. I recount this to you briefly, since the space of a letter does not permit a long explanation. Next, digressing, as is his habit, in order to weaken his enemies as well as to introduce his next sermon, he said that our internal strife could enable a tyrant to rise up who would destroy our homes and lay waste our lands; and this was not contrary to that which he had already preached, that is, that Florence was going to be prosperous and would rule all of Italy, since it would be only a short time before the tyrant would be driven out; and on this note he completed his sermon.

The next morning, still preaching on Exodus and coming to that section where the Bible says that Moses killed an Egyptian, the friar declared that the Egyptian symbolized evil men and that Moses represented the prophet who killed them by uncovering their evil ways, and he said: "O Egyptian, I shall give you a thrust of my sword!"; and here he began to flip through your books, 0 you priests, and treated you in such a manner that not even a dog would come near you. Then he added, and this is what he was trying to get at all along, that he wanted to give the Egyptian another and greater wound, and he said that God had told him that there was one in Florence who sought to make himself a tyrant and who was scheming to achieve this goal: and that to attempt to drive out the friar, to excommunicate the friar, and to persecute the friar, meant simply that he wanted to be a tyrant; and he added that the laws should be observed. And he said so much about it that men later in the day publicly speculated about the man to whom the friar referred, a man who is about as close to becoming tyrant of Florence as you are to heaven! But since the Signoria later on wrote in his favor to the Pope, and since he saw that he need no longer fear his enemies in Florence, where before he wanted only to unite his own faction by attacking his enemies and to frighten them with the name of the tyrant, now, when he no longer need do so, he has changed his disguise: now he tries to turn all of them against the Holy Father, still encouraging them to join in the alliance already formed without mentioning either the name of the tyrants or their evilness, and toward the Supreme Pontiff he turns his churlish yappings and says of him what one would say of only the most evil of men; and thus, according to my view, he keeps changing with the times and makes his lies more believable.

Now, whatever the common herd is saying and what men are hoping or fearing, I shall leave to your judgment, since you are prudent and can evaluate that better than I; you understand our internal quarrels and the temper of the times and, since you are in Rome, you are also very aware of the Pope's feelings. I beg of you only one thing: that if you have not found reading these letters of mine tiring, may you also not find it burdensome to write me, giving me your judgment of the nature of these

times and telling me what you make of our affairs. Farewell. In Florence, March 8, 1498.
Your Niccolò Machiavelli
Son of Bernardo

The second letter, dated 1509, is addressed to Luigi Guicciardini (a member of the family of the more famous Francesco) and contains an unusual portrait of a grotesque prostitute, a figure no doubt born of an authentic experience and Machiavelli's vivid imagination.

II

TO LUIGI GUICCIARDINI IN MANTUA

To Signor Luigi Guicciardini
as his dearest brother, in Mantua

Damn it all, Luigi! You see how fortune can bring about in men different results in similar matters. You, when you have screwed her once, you still get the urge to screw her again—you still want another go at her. But I, having been here several days, going blind crazy without my wife, came across an old woman who washed my shirts; she lives in a house that is practically underground, and the only light that comes in is from the door. I was passing by there one day, and she recognized me and made a big fuss over me; she said that if I wished, she would show me some beautiful shirts that I might want to buy. I believed her—innocent prick that I am! And when I was inside I dimly saw a woman hiding in a comer, pretending to be bashful with a towel over her head and face. The old hag took me by the hand and led me to the woman, saying: "This is the shirt that I want to sell, but I want you to try it on first and pay later." Timid as I am, I was now completely terrified; nevertheless, since I was alone with her and in the dark (the old lady left the house immediately and shut the door), I gave her a good hump. Even though I found her thighs flabby and her cunt watery and her breath stinking a bit, my lust was so desperate that I went ahead and gave it to her anyway! And once I had her, I had the urge to see my merchandise and I took a brand from the fireplace near me and lit a lamp that was above it; and hardly was it lit when the light almost dropped from my hand. My God! The woman was so ugly that I almost dropped dead. The first thing

I noticed was a tuft of hair, half white and half black, and although the top of her head was bald, which allowed you to observe a number of lice taking a stroll, nevertheless a few hairs mingled with the whiskers that grew around her face; and on top of her small, wrinkled head there was a scar-burn which made her look as if she had been branded at the market; her eyebrows were full of nits; one eye looked down, the other up, and one was larger than the other. Her tear ducts were full of mucus and her eyelashes plucked; her nose was twisted into a funny shape, the nostrils were full of snot, and one of them was half cut off; her mouth looked like Lorenzo de' Medici's, but it was twisted on one side and drooled a bit since she had no teeth to keep the saliva in her mouth; her upper lip was covered with a thin but rather long moustache; her chin was long and sharp, pointed up, and from it hung a bit of skin that dangled to her Adam's apple. As I stood there, amazed at this monster, she noticed my surprise and tried to say: "What is the trouble, sir?"; but she could not, since she was a stutterer, and as she opened her mouth there came from it such a stinking breath that my eyes and my nose, the two gateways of the two most outraged senses, found themselves offended by this pestilence; this was such a shock to my stomach that, not being able to bear it, it heaved so much that I vomited all over her. And so, having paid her in the way she deserved, I left. And I swear to God, I don't believe that my lust will return as long as I am in Lombardy. So you can praise God in the hope of enjoying your pleasures again, while I shall be thankful because I have lost the fear of ever again having such an unfortunate experience.

I think that I will have some money left from this trip, and I would like to put it into some small investment when I am back in Florence. I thought about setting up a poultry yard; I need some employee to run it for me. I hear that Piero di Martino is interested; I would like to hear from him if he is able and to have you reply to me. Because if he doesn't want to, I have to find someone else.

Giovanni will give you the news from here. Give Jacopo my regards and remember me to him and don't forget Marco. In Verona on December 9, 1509.
Niccolò Machiavelli
[P.S.] I am awaiting the reply of Gualtieri about my poem.

The third letter presents some difficulties. Although scholars have traditionally believed it to be addressed to Piero Soderini around 1512-1513, recent evidence suggests that the letter was actually composed in 1506. Furthermore, some scholars contend that it was addressed not to Piero Soderini (1452-1522), Machiavelli's

patron and superior in the Florentine chancery (he was elected gonfaloniere for life in 1502, only to lose his position with the return of the Medici and the downfall of the republic), but to his nephew, Giovan Battista Soderini. Since the ideas discussed in the letter are closely related to ***important*** *sections of both* The Prince *and* The Discourses, *the earlier composition would indicate that some of* ***Machiavelli's*** *fundamental concepts* ***were formulated considerably*** *earlier than many scholarly accounts of their development might indicate.*

III

TO GIOVAN BATTISTA SODERINI OR PIERO SODERINI IN PERUGIA

A disguised letter of yours reached me—but I knew it was yours after reading ten words. I can imagine how many people came to meet you at Piombino, and I am sure of your annoyances and those of Filippo, since I know how one of you is offended by too much light and the other by too little. January does not bother me, as long as I can be sure that February improves. I am sorry about Filippo's suspicion and await the result anxiously. [The man who does not know how to fence confuses one who does.][2] Your letter was brief, but I manage to make it longer by rereading it. I appreciated it, since it gave me the opportunity to do something I was afraid to do and which you warn me not to do; and only this part of the letter have I ignored. I would be surprised by this, if my fate had not shown me so many and so great a variety of things that I am forced to be seldom astonished or to admit having learned little while reading about and participating in the actions of men and the methods of their deeds.

I know you and the compass by which you steer, and even if it were to be faulty, which it cannot be, I would not condemn it, seeing to what ports it has guided you, [the ranks with which it has honored you] and with what hope it nourishes you. Therefore I see, not with your mirror, where nothing is seen without prudence, but with that of the multitude, that one is obliged to look to the results of an action, to see how it was accomplished, and not to the means by which it was achieved. [Each man governs himself according to his fantasy.] And I see how different courses of action bring about the same result, as different roads lead to the same destination,

and how many who use different means achieve the same goal—the actions of this Pope and the results they have achieved were all that was needed to prove this opinion. [Do not give advice to anyone nor accept any, except for general opinions; each man should do what his spirit tells him, and with boldness.] Hannibal and Scipio were both excellent military leaders: the first, by means of cruelty, treachery, and disdain for religion, kept his armies united in Italy and made himself admired by the peoples, who, in order to follow him, rebelled against Rome; the second, by means of piety, faith, and respect for religion in Spain, had the same following from those peoples; and both the one and the other won victory after victory. But since it is not fashionable to cite the Romans, Lorenzo de' Medici disarmed the people in order to hold Florence, while Giovanni Bentivoglio armed them to hold Bologna; the Vitelli at Castello and the present Duke of Urbino in his state destroyed fortresses in order to hold those states, while Count Francesco and many others built them within their states to hold them. [Trust Fortune, the friend of young men, and adapt yourself to the situation. But you cannot both have fortresses and not have them, be both cruel and pious.] The Emperor Titus thought he would lose his empire the day he failed to do a favor for someone; some other ruler might fear to lose his state the day he pleased someone. Many men succeed in their plans by weighing and measuring everything. [When Fortune becomes weary, disaster ensues. The family, the city, each man has its fortune founded on its method of proceeding, and each of these becomes weary, and when Fortune is run down, one must revive it with another method. Compare this to a horse led for too long a time around the same fortress.] This Pope Julius, who has neither a scale nor a measure, achieves by chance while disarmed what with proper preparation and arms he could attain only with difficulty. We have seen and still see the above examples and countless others of like fashion which could be cited concerning the acquisition of kingdoms and dominions or the loss of them, according to circumstances; and when a method led to success it was praised; when it led to failure, it was condemned; and sometimes after a lengthy prosperity, loss is blamed not on oneself but on heaven and the disposition of the Fates. But why it happens that the same actions are sometimes equally effective and equally damaging I do not know, but I should like very much to find out; thus, in order to hear your opinion, I will be presumptuous enough to tell you mine.

I believe that as Nature has given every man a different face, so she also has given each a different character and imagination. From this it follows that each man governs himself according to his particular character and imagination. And because, on the other hand, times change and the order of things always shifts, the fortunate

man, the one whose wishes are completely fulfilled, is he who fits his plan of action to the times; to the contrary, the unhappy man is he who fails to match his actions to the times and to the order of things. Thus, it can easily occur that two men, acting in different ways, can achieve the same result, since each of them can fit themselves to the circumstances, for patterns of events are as many as the number of provinces or states. But because the times and affairs are often transformed, both in general and in particulars, and men do not change their imaginations nor their methods, it happens that one man has in one instance good fortune and in another bad. And, truly, anyone so wise as to understand the times and the order of things and be able to accommodate himself to them would always have good fortune, or at least he would avoid the bad, and then the truth would emerge: that the wise man can command the stars and the Fates. But since such men cannot be found, men being only shortsighted and unable to discipline their characters, it follows that Fortune changes and commands men and keeps them under her yoke. And to verify this opinion, the examples above are sufficient; I founded my view on them, and they should support it. Cruelty, perfidy, and contempt for religion help to increase the reputation of a new ruler in a province where humanity, faith, and religion have long been abandoned; in like manner, humanity, faith, and religion are efficacious where cruelty, perfidy, and contempt for religion have reigned for a time; for just as bitter things disturb the taste and sweet things glut it, so men grow tired of the good and complain of the bad. These, among other causes, opened Italy to Hannibal and Spain to Scipio, and thus each corresponded, according to his manner of proceeding, to the times and the order of things. At that same time, a man like Scipio would not have been so fortunate in Italy, nor one like Hannibal so successful in Spain, as both the one and the other were in their respective areas.
Niccolò Machiavelli

The next three letters are addressed to Francesco Vettori (1474-1539), the Florentine ambassador to Rome from 1513 to 1515, who had become Machiavelli's friend during an earlier diplomatic mission which took them both to Germany. All three letters were written after Machiavelli's enforced retirement from political life and reveal his moods during the important period in which The Prince *was composed. The letter describing the work's composition is perhaps the most famous letter in Italian Renaissance literature and is a moving testament to Machiavelli's love for the classics which inspired his treatise.*

IV

TO FRANCESCO VETTORI IN ROME

Magnifice domine orator,

> And I, aware of his changed color, said:
> "But how can I go on if you are frightened?
> You are my constant strength when I lose heart."[3]

This letter of yours has scared me more than the rack, and I am sorry about any idea you may have that I am angry, not for my own sake, because I am used to no longer desiring anything passionately, but for yours, and I beg you to imitate others who make a place for themselves with astuteness and insistence, rather than with talent and prudence; and as for that story about Totto, it displeases me if it displeases you. Furthermore, I do not think about it, and if I cannot be enrolled, I'll roll on;[4] and I ask you once and for all not to worry about the requests I make of you, since I will not be upset if I do not obtain them.

If you are tired of discussing affairs, since many times you see them end up in a way contrary to the concepts and arguments that you form about them, you are correct, because the same thing has happened to me. Yet, if I could speak to you, I would do nothing more than fill your head with imaginary plans, since Fortune has decided that I must talk about the state—not knowing how to discuss either the silk trade or the wool business, either profits or losses. I have to vow either to remain silent or to speak of this. If I could leave Florentine territory, I too would certainly go to see if the Pope were at home; but in spite of so many favors dispensed, I was ignored by him because of my negligent absence. I shall wait for September.

I understand that Cardinal Soderini has many dealings with the Pope. I should like you to advise me if you think it would be fitting for me to write him a letter asking that he commend me to His Holiness; or if it might be best that you speak privately on my behalf with the cardinal; or if neither should be done—in which case you might send me a short reply.

As for the horse, you make me laugh by reminding me of it. Only when I remember it will you have to pay, and not otherwise.

Our archbishop must be dead by this hour; may God receive his soul and those of his family. *Valete.* In Florence, April 9, 1513.

Niccolò Machiavelli
formerly Secretary

V

TO FRANCESCO VETTORI IN ROME

Magnificent Ambassador. Divine favors were never late.[5] I say this because it appears that I have not lost but have rather misplaced your favor, since you have not written to me for quite a long time, and I was in doubt as to the cause. And I paid little attention to all the reasons that came to mind, except for one: I feared that you had stopped writing to me because you heard that I was not a good guardian for your letters; and I knew that outside of Filippo [Casavecchia] and Paolo [Vettori], no one else, as far as I know, has seen them. But now I have found your favor once again in your last letter of the twenty-third of the past month. I am very happy to see how regularly and calmly you carry on your public office, and urge you to continue in this way, since anyone who loses his own interests for those of others sacrifices his own and receives no thanks from the others. And since it is Fortune that does everything, it is she who wishes us to leave her alone, to be quiet and not to give her trouble, and to wait until she allows us to act again; then you will do well to strive harder, to observe things more closely, and it will be time for me to leave my country home and say: “Here I am!” In the meantime, I can only tell you in this letter of mine what my life is like, wishing to match favor with favor, and if you think you would like to exchange yours for mine, I would be very happy to do so.

I live in the country, and since my recent misadventures in Florence I have not spent, in total, twenty days there. Until recently, I have been snaring thrushes with my own hands. Rising before daybreak, I prepare the birdlime and go out with such a bundle of bird cages on my back that I look like Geta when he returned from port with the books of Amphitryon;[6] I usually catch at least two, at the most six thrushes. I spent all of September doing this. Then this pastime, vile and foreign to my nature as it is, came to an end, to my displeasure; let me tell you what my life is like now: I rise in the morning with the sun and go into a wood that I am having cut, where I remain two hours in order to check the work done the day before and to pass the time with the woodcutters, who always have some argument at hand among

themselves or with their neighbors. And concerning this wood, I could tell you a thousand entertaining things that have happened to me in my affairs with Frosino da Panzano and with others who wanted part of it. And Frosino, especially—he sent for several cords of wood without even saying anything, and on payment he wanted to hold back ten lire which he says he should have had from me four years ago when he beat me at cards at Antonio Guicciardini's. I began to raise the devil and was going to accuse the carter who had come to steal the wood, but Giovanni Machiavelli entered the matter and made peace. Batista Guicciardini, Filippo Ginori, Tommaso del Bene, and some other citizens each bought a cord from me when that north wind was blowing.[7] I made promises to them all and sent one cord to Tommaso, which, by the time it reached Florence, turned out to be half a cord because he and his wife, his children, and the help piled it, so that it looked like Gabburra[8] and his boys butchering an ox on a Thursday. So, when I saw who was making a profit on this, I told the others that I had no more wood left, and they all made a big thing of it, especially Batista, who adds this to his other misfortunes of Prato.

Leaving the wood, I go to a spring, and from there to my bird-snare. I have a book with me, either Dante or Petrarca or one of the lesser poets like Tibullus, Ovid, and the like: I read about their amorous passions and about their loves, I remember my own, and I revel for a moment in this thought. I then move on up the road to the inn, I speak with those who pass, and I ask them for news of their area; I learn many things and note the different and diverse tastes and ways of thinking of men. Lunchtime comes, when my family and I eat that food which this poor farm and my meager patrimony permit. After eating, I return to the inn: there I usually find the innkeeper, a butcher, a miller, and two bakers. With these men I waste my time playing cards all day and from these games a thousand disagreements and countless offensive words arise, and most of the time our arguments are over a few cents; nevertheless, we can be heard yelling from San Casciano. Caught this way among these lice I wipe the mold from my brain and release my feeling of being ill-treated by Fate; I am happy to be driven along this road by her, as I wait to see if she will be ashamed of doing so.

When evening comes, I return to my home, and I go into my study; and on the threshold, I take off my everyday clothes, which are covered with mud and mire, and I put on regal and curial robes; and dressed in a more appropriate manner I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men and am welcomed by them kindly, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born ; and there I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they, in

their humanity, answer me; and for four hours I feel no boredom, I dismiss every affliction, I no longer fear poverty nor do I tremble at the thought of death: I become completely part of them. And as Dante says that knowledge does not exist without the retention of it by memory,[9] I have noted down what I have learned from their conversation, and I composed a little work, De *principatibus,* where I delve as deeply as I can into thoughts on this subject, discussing what a principality is, what kinds there are, how they are acquired, how they are maintained, why they are lost. And if any of my fantasies has ever pleased you, this should not displease you; and to a prince, and especially to a new prince, it should be welcomed; therefore, I am dedicating it to his Magnificence, Giuliano.[10] Filippo Casavecchia has seen it; he can give you some idea both of the work itself and of the discussion we have had concerning it, although I am still enlarging it and polishing it up.

You would like me, Magnificent Ambassador, to leave this life here and to come to enjoy yours with you. I shall do it, come what may, but what keeps me back at present are certain affairs of mine which I shall settle within six weeks. What makes me hesitate is that the Soderini[11] are there, and I would be obliged, coming there, to visit them and speak to them. I would not be surprised if on my return I might have to stay at the Bargello prison rather than at home, since although this state has very strong foundations and great security, it is also new and, because of this, suspicious, and there are plenty of sly men who, to appear like Pagolo Bertini,[12] would put others in debt and leave the worries to me. I beg you to relieve me of this fear, and then, whatever happens, I shall come within the time established to find you.

I talked with Filippo about this little book of mine: whether or not I should present it to him [Giuliano], and whether, giving it to him, I should bring it myself or have it delivered to you. Giving it makes me afraid that Giuliano won't read it and that Ardinghelli[13] will take the credit for this, my latest labor. I am urged to give it by the necessity that drives me: I am wearing myself away, and I cannot remain in this state for long without being despised for my poverty, not to mention my desire that these Medici lords begin to make use of me, even if they start me off by rolling stones. If I could not win their favor with this work, then I should have myself to blame; and in this work, if it were read, they would see that I have been at the study of statecraft for fifteen years and have not slept nor played about; and each one of them should be happy to obtain the services of one who is full of experience at another man's expense. And they should not doubt my loyalty, for always having kept my word, I have not now learned to break it; and anyone who

has been faithful and honest for forty-three years, as I have been, cannot change his character; and my poverty is witness to my honesty and goodness.

I should like you, therefore, to write me what you think about this matter, and I commend myself to you. *Sis felix.* December 10, 1513.
Niccolò Machiavelli in Florence

VI

TO FRANCESCO VETTORI IN ROME

Magnificent Ambassador Francesco Vettori,

My friend, you have kept me in good spirits with these accounts of your Roman love affair, and you have lifted from my mind countless problems as I read and think about your pleasures and your fits of anger—one could not be without the other. And truly Fortune has brought me to a place where I can return the favor to you: living in the country, I met a creature so gentle, so delicate, so noble, both in her nature and in her temperament, that I could neither praise her nor love her so much that she would not deserve more. I should, as you did with me, tell about the beginnings of this love, with what snares it took me, where Love set them, of what quality they were: they were nets of gold, spread among flowers, embroidered by Venus, so soft and pleasing that although a crude heart could have broken them, nonetheless, I did not wish to, and for a spell I enjoyed myself in them, so much that the tender threads became hardened and fastened with knots impossible to loosen. And do not think that Love used ordinary measures to capture me, for knowing that they would not suffice, he employed extraordinary means, of which I knew nothing nor did I turn to avoid them. You must realize that as I near fifty years of age, neither does the harsh sun bother me, nor the rough roads tire me, nor the darkness of the night frighten me. Everything seems simple to me, and to her every whim I adapt myself, no matter how strange and contrary to my nature. And although I seem to have gotten into great difficulty, I feel, nevertheless, such sweetness in it—both because of what that sweet and rare face does to me and also because it has let me put aside the recollection of all my problems—that I do not want to free myself from it for anything in the world, even if I could. I have, therefore, abandoned thoughts of great and serious affairs; neither reading about ancient times nor discussing the present delights me further; everything has changed

into sweet conversations, for which I thank Venus and all her Cyprian island. So if it occurs to you to write something about your lady, write it, and as far as other matters are concerned, you can discuss them with those who value them more and understand them better, since I have never had anything but loss from them, whereas in matters of love I have always found pleasure and good. Valete. *Ex Florentia, die* III *Augusti* 1514.
Your Niccolò Machiavelli

The final letter, dated 1521, is addressed to Francesco Guicclardini (1483-1540). Renaissance Italy's foremost historian and Machiavelli's first important critic and interpreter. Since Guicciardini was a key administrator in the papal states and the confidant of the Medici Pope Clement VII, Machiavelli obviously hoped that his friendship might also assist him in regaining the favor of his former adversaries. Although Guicciardini was usually not a man to accept Machiavelli's belief in historical repetition, he noted a poignant parallel between Machiavelli's ill fortune and that of another great man in a letter written in reply to the one reprinted here:
My dear Machiavelli. When I read your titles of orator of the republic to the Minor Friars and ***I*** *consider with how many kings, dukes, and princes you have negotiated in other times, I recall Lysander to whom, after so many victories and triumphs, was given the task of passing out rations to those same soldiers he had formerly commanded gloriously. And I* ***say:*** *see how the same events repeat themselves,* ***the faces*** *of the protagonists and the superficial appearances only having changed.*
The situation described in Machiavelli's letter shows that even in the midst of adversity he ***never failed*** *to retain his sense of humor. His scheme to impress the gullible friars with Guicciardini's cooperation while he searched for a Lenten preacher more to his liking was successful and resulted in an immediate improvement in his standing among the churchmen there, as well as a rise in the quality of his bed and board.*

VII

TO FRANCESCO GUICCIARDINI IN MODENA[14]

Magnifice vir, maior ***observandissime:***

When your letter arrived, I was sitting on the toilet thinking about the vanities of this world, and I was completely absorbed in constructing a preacher after my own tastes for Florence, one that would suit me perfectly, for in this I want to be as stubborn as in my ideas on other matters. And because I have never failed in my duty to the Republic by not helping her whenever I could—if not with works, at least with words, if not with words, then at least with gestures—I do not intend to fail her in this. It is true that I differ with my fellow citizens in this as well as in other matters, for they want a preacher to show them the way to Paradise, and I want to find one that will show them how to go to the devil; they want a man who is serious and prudent, and I want one who is crazier than Pozzo, smarter than Brother Girolamo, and more hypocritical than Brother Alberto. This would be nice, something worthy of our time: to see what we have experienced in many priests all in one man—I believe that the true way of going to Paradise is to learn the way to Hell in order to avoid it. Besides this, seeing how much credit is given to a poor wretch who hides himself under the cloak of religion, one can easily imagine how much credit a good man would receive who actually, and not in disguise, trudged the muddy paths of St. Francis. As this train of thought pleases me, I intend to pick Rovaio, and I think that if he is like his brothers and sisters, he will be just the choice. I would appreciate your opinion about it if you write again.

I remain idle here because I cannot carry out my mission until the general and the assessors are elected, and I keep wondering how to cause so much trouble among these friars that they might, here or in other places, beat each other up with their sandals; and if I do not lose my wits I believe that I shall succeed; and I think that your Excellency's advice and help will be of great use to me. And if you were to come here on the pretext of taking a pleasure trip, that would be fine, or, at least, if you could give me in writing a few master strokes—in fact, if you would keep in touch with me on this account by sending me a messenger once a day, as you have done today, you would help me even more: in the first place, you would clarify things and advise me on the scheme; in the second place, you would increase my prestige here, when the friars see the dispatches pouring in. Let me tell you that when your crossbowman arrived with your letter, bowing to the ground, saying that he was sent especially and in haste, every one of those priests bristled with so much respect and with such an uproar that everything was turned topsy-turvy, and many of them asked me what the news was; and I, to enhance my importance, said that the Emperor was waiting at Trent and that the Swiss had called new diets, and that the King of France wished to parlay personally with that ruler, but that his counselors were advising him against it; and so, all of them stood there with their

mouths wide open with hat in hand; and even now while I am writing this to you there is a circle of them around me, watching me write and for so long a time they are amazed and they look at me as if I were possessed; and to amaze them even more, I pause over my pen from time to time and sigh, and they stand there with their mouths wide open—if they knew what I was writing to you, they would really be astonished! Your Lordship knows that when a person, according to these friars, is confirmed in a state of grace, the Devil no longer has the power to tempt him—well, I am not afraid that these friars will turn me into a hypocrite, since I think I am well confirmed.

As for the lies of the people of Carpi, I can match them all, since for a long time now I have been educating myself in that art so that I don't need Francesco Martelli's help; it has been a long time since I have said what I think or have believed what I said, and if I do speak the truth sometimes, I hide it among so many lies that it is difficult to find it again.

I have not spoken to the Governor because, having found lodgings, I felt that speaking to him was useless. This morning in church I stared at him a bit while he was looking at some paintings. I think that he is perfectly made: since the part corresponds to the whole, we can believe that he is what he appears to be—that his deformity does not lie. If I had had your letter with me, I might have drawn a bucketful from it. But nothing has come of it, and I wait for tomorrow to come with advice from you about my affairs. I hope you will send one of those crossbowmen of yours: make him gallop and arrive here all sweaty so that the people will be astonished; by doing this you will do me honor and will also give your crossbowmen a bit of exercise, which is also very good for horses at this time of the year. I would write you more if I wished to tax my fantasy, but I want to keep it as fresh as I can for tomorrow. I send my regards to Your Lordship, *quae semper ut vult valeat.* In Carpi, May 17, 1521.

Your Niccolò Machiavelli,
Ambassador to the Minor Friars

1
A reference to St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (II, 2).

2
Material in brackets represents marginal notes from the original manuscript of the letter.

3
Dante, *Inferno,* IV, 16-18.

4
A play on words: rotolare ("to enroll") refers to being placed on the pope's list of dependents *(rotulo).*

5
A reference to Petrarch's *Triumphs* ("Triumph of Eternity," 1.13).

6
An allusion to a popular novella of the fifteenth century, *Geta and Birria.*

7
An allusion either to Machiavelli's difficulties with the Medici after the collapse of the Florentine republic in 1512 or to the sack of Prato in 1512, which was administered at the time by Batista Guicciardini.

8
Gabburra was probably a well-known butcher.

9
Paradiso, V, 41-42.

10
Initially *The Prince* was dedicated to Giuliano de' Medici, but after his death in 1516 the work was addressed to his successor, Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino.

11
Machiavelli here refers to his former superior, Piero Soderini, and his brother, Cardinal Francesco Soderini, both of whom had received permission from the Medici Pope, Leo X, to reside in Rome. Machiavelli's visit might have aroused Medici suspicion that he was in league with a Soderini-led republican **plot.**

12
One of the ardent Medici supporters and, therefore, a potential enemy of Machiavelli.

13
Pietro Ardinghelli, a papal secretary at Leo X's court.

14

Many commentators believe this Brother Alberto to be the unworthy priest of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (IV, 2). But since the other two priests referred to in the passage are identifiable historical figures (Brother Girolamo being Girolamo Savonarola and Pozzo being one of his adversaries), it is also possible that the Brother Alberto here referred to is Alberto da Orvieto, the priest sent to Florence by Pope Alexander VI in 1495. This man had advised the Borgia Pope, Savonarola's most dangerous enemy, to summon Savonarola to Rome under some pretext in order to imprison him when he arrived. Both Boccaccio's literary character and the historical figure would have reflected a perfect example of hypocrisy in a churchman.

15

This expression refers to the practice Charles followed in marking the houses that were to be used to quarter his troops during the invasion of Italy in 1494-1495. Machiavelli implies by this that Italian resistance to Charles' invasion was nonexistent.

16

Aeneid, II, 563-564.

17

The Italian original*, si guarda al fine,* has often been mistranslated as "the ends justify the means," something Machiavelli never wrote. For another important statement concerning ends and means, see Machiavelli's remarks about Romulus in *Discourses,* I, ix.

18

Livy, IX, i.

19

Here Machiavelli refers to the battle of Fornovo (1495) and the taking of Alexandria (1499), Capua (1501), Genoa (1507), Vailà (1509), Bologna (1511), and Mestri (1513).

20

On April 11, 1512, the French were victorious under the leadership of Gaston de Foix.

21

From Petrarch's famous *canzone*, "Italia mia" (11. 93-96).

22

Machiavelli here refers both to the constitutional changes in Florence after the suppression of a rebellion at Arezzo and to the return of the Medici and the fall of Soderini's republic after the sack of Prato.